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LONELINESS AND CELLULAR CONFINEMENT IN ENGLISH PRISONS 1878–1921

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This article aims to examine the practice of cellular confinement in English prisons between 1878 and 1921. In particular, I discuss the provenance of this feature of prison discipline before looking at the actual implementation of cellular confinement in the period under consideration. Some of the psychological effects on prisoners of this system are described, as well as some of the ways in which prisoners and staff sought to soften or evade its rigour.

On 1 April 1878, a new central government body, known as 'The Prison Commission', took over the administration of all English and Welsh local prisons from the county and borough magistrates and directly ran them from central-London headquarters thereafter. The aim of that Commission was heralded as being to establish principles of efficiency, uniformity and economy in prison discipline across the land, and the first chairman, Edmund du Cane, had been chairman of the Directors of English Convict Prisons since 1869. Du Cane was a very strong believer in the prevailing wisdom that offenders were sent to prison for deliberate punishment by infliction of rigid, measured severity and saw one of his missions as being to ensure carefully graded suffering to prisoners in order to achieve quantified deterrence.

By the late-nineteenth century, there were two types of English prison. The first category comprised around 70 local prisons for prisoners on remand or undergoing short sentences. The second consisted of some 10 convict prisons, such as Dartmoor, Parkhurst, Portland, Chatham and Millbank, which held those known as convicts undergoing long sentences of penal servitude (minimum three years)—the disposal created in the 1850s to replace transportation. Actual numbers of prisons fell sharply until 1921, not least because numbers of inmates fell during the period under discussion from around a daily average of 20,000 in 1876 in local prisons to 8,400 in 1921, and from 10,000 to 1,400 in the convict prisons between the same years (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922: 3). In 1921, there survived around 40 local and 4 convict prisons, including Dartmoor and Parkhurst.

At both types of establishment, the regimes between 1878 and 1921 were deliberately designed to restrict rigidly communication between prisoners. This was for a number of reasons. One of these was to maximize control, for many theorists and practitioners had concluded that prisoners in uncontrolled association banded together to defy the staff, subvert the regime, plan crimes jointly for commission after release and instruct each other in criminal skills. Secondly, there was always a strong belief in the deterrent and retributory properties of prohibition on communication. However, there was also a reformatory provenance to this approach and, in the mid-nineteenth century, there had emerged a determined and well organized school of fundamentalist advocates for

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the entire regime to consist of wholesale cellular separation throughout sentence and these urged that such enforced loneliness rendered the prisoner docile and tractable, prone to remorse and amenable to advice, instruction and admonition. This was called 'the Separate System'. As two founding fathers of this system, the prison inspectors, Whitworth Russell and William Crawford, commented in 1838:

> In short, upon the offender in his separate cell all the moral machinery of the system is brought to bear with as much force and effect as if the prison contained no other culprit but himself. His submission then must be immediate and complete: he will be calm, for there is nothing to ruffle or discompose him; he will be disposed to self communion, for he has no companion but his own thoughts; he will be led to listen with attention and respect to the instruction, reproof or consolation, of his keepers and instructors, for almost the only accents of friendly intercourse are those which issue from their lips; and he will apply himself with ardour to the labour of his hands' as a relief from 'the insufferable burden of idleness and ennui.' (*Third Report of Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain Part 1* 1837–8: 28)

Russell and Crawford summoned up the authority of such pioneers of prison reform as John Howard, who surveyed the prison system in the late-eighteenth century to give historical provenance to their almost mystical veneration of separation, urging that the separate system alone guaranteed fully the reform of the individual through atonement by suffering, repentance through reflection and divine grace and instruction in theology and basic skills of the isolated prisoner by the staff of the prison.

In line with this thinking, new prisons mushroomed throughout the realm in the mid-nineteenth century, constructed as rows of tiered cells, radiating from a central administrative block, and many of these survive to this day. Where association was allowed in the mid-nineteenth century, as in the rival to the separate system—the 'silent system', which allowed silent association, or the later stages of a sentence of penal servitude on labour gangs—there was a total ban on communication between prisoners, with severe punishment for infringement of this. But association with very severe limitation on communication also invited single-cellular isolation for periods, such as night, when the prisoners were not in association and the great dormitories which had characterized some of the large prisons, such as Coldbath Fields House of Correction for Middlesex in the mid-nineteenth century, disappeared in favour of cells as a matter of Prison Commission policy.

The purpose of restricting communication was to deprive the prisoner of the solaces and reinforcements of association and ensure that all communication was consistent with the purposes of discipline and reformation. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that the exaggerated reformatory enthusiasms which had given birth to the separate system had long since evaporated, the emphasis on cellular separation as a highly efficient, punitive and deterrent system of prison discipline strengthened. Edmund Du Cane firmly believed in the deterrent and punitive value of separation and therefore the steer towards separation from the Prison Commissioners was very firm. After Du Cane's retirement in 1895, the new Chairman of the Prison Commission, Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, remained a strong proponent of separation. He accepted that the original claims made for separation as an agent of moral reformation had been greatly exaggerated but he was convinced that it prevented contamination and was of the 'highest advantage' as a preparation for subsequent stages of association in prison. He particularly believed in it as a first stage of penal servitude and believed that it provided an opportunity for reflection for those who had been living a criminal

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lifestyle. He was also sure that it protected new offenders and non-criminal prisoners from a recidivistic prison culture, whilst proving particularly irksome to the recidivist who would otherwise glory in his or her associations in prison. It also allowed good influences of religion and education to bear fruit (Chair of Prison Commission to Home Secretary 25/2/1910).

From the late-nineteenth century until 1921, therefore, the first 28 days of a sentence in a local prison were served in separation, with labour, such as the turning of a crank handle or oakum picking to make sacks or rope, carried out in the cell and limited associated labour only granted thereafter when a certain number of marks had been earned. Since the great majority of local prison sentences in the late-nineteenth century did not exceed this period, most local prisoners, therefore, served their whole time in separation (McConville 1995: 239–40). In penal servitude, the first nine months of sentence for recidivists, with lesser terms for non-recidivists, were served in cellular isolation from other prisoners before transfer to associated labour. So great was the dedication of the Prison Commission to cellular confinement almost as a talisman of the prison system, sanctified by tradition, that Winston Churchill, when he was Home Secretary between 1910 and 1911, had the greatest difficulty in getting this initial separation reduced to three months for recidivists, and one month for first offenders (Radzinowicz and Hood: 594–5). Thus, although there was association in silence at labour in the system, most notably in the convict prisons after the initial period of separation, lengthy periods of confinement in cells played a highly significant role in both the convict and the local prison systems throughout the period under review. It should not, incidentally, be forgotten that there were always, at any one time, a significant number of prisoners isolated in punishment cells for offences against prison discipline.

Even after serving the initial total separation of both local prison and penal servitude, the local prisoner continued to spend around 16 hours a day in the cell, whilst, for convicts, it could be routinely 17½ hours (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922: 324). Each cell was much the same in size and furnishings to all the others. In the early twentieth century, in each, cell furnishings included a mattress (if earned by good behaviour), bed board, pillow, mug, stool, plate, slop bucket, towel, two blankets, soap, hair brush and comb, spoon, salt cellar, tooth brush and paste, bible, prayer book and hymn book and dish cloth (Mason 1918: 159). There was also a standard collection of regulation and prayer cards, containing such items as the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments—homilies on duty to God and man.

This emphasis on cellular isolation had its critics from the beginning. Some, like Charles Dickens and *The Times* newspaper, waged a campaign in the mid-nineteenth century to prove that long periods of cellular isolation led to insanity and there was a long and combative exchange of views on this subject. Again, in the early twentieth century, John Galsworthy's play, 'Justice', which opened in the West End in 1910, was a controversial and swingeing attack on the suffering inflicted by separation. This had followed an investigation by Galsworthy into the practice of separation in penal servitude and a long exchange of correspondence between himself and the Home Office. As part of this investigation, Galsworthy had discovered extraordinary devices to preserve separation whilst meeting its increasing critics. One such was the placing of convicts in sunken pits in sheds to work. Thus, they were outside their cells, thereby apparently answering the accusation that constant confinement in the cell led to mental incapacitation; nonetheless, in this system, the convict could not converse with

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or see others whilst working but could be overseen by staff patrolling long, central gangways between these sunken pits (Galsworthy to Ruggles-Brise October 1909).

Up to 1921 prisoners, therefore, had to endure varying amounts of loneliness as a calculated and officially highly esteemed element of their punishment, based on a long tradition of penological theory. Many of them commented on their initial horror at encountering separation. Florence Maybrick, convicted controversially in 1889 for murder of her husband by arsenic poisoning and reprieved from the death penalty to serve 15 years in penal servitude, was initially held at Chatham Convict Prison and confined for 22 hours a day in a cell. She described her longing for human kindness, the crushing boredom and her intense despair and hopelessness at the prospect of years of the same to follow. As she wrote:

> The routine reeled itself off with mechanical precision. The rules were enforced and carried out to the letter. The deadly monotony never varied; all days are alike; weeks, months, years slowly accumulate, and, in the mean time, the mental rust is eating into the weary brain, and the outspoken cry rises up daily-'How long, O Lord! How long? (Maybrick 1905: 199–200)

Prisoners emphasized the lack of stimulation and intense boredom during the day and described night after night of sleeplessness, either trying to sleep on an uncomfortable plank bed or hard mattress, or just sitting on the bed in the cell, staring into the darkness, the silence punctuated only by the shrieking of tormented or delirious inmates and the padding of the night patrols' slippers on the landing as they made their way round each landing to check each prisoner through the spy-hole on the cell door. The weekends tended to be the worst, because there was little labour in association and less exercise so that 'the misery and deadness of Saturday is followed by the misery and deadness of Sunday' (B.2.15 1924: 65). Furthermore, the cells were not heated until the inter-War years and, in winter, were often so cold at night that prisoners went straight to bed fully clothed after their 5 o'clock supper.

There were two aspects of all this which were especially noted by prisoners in regard to staff—the obvious opportunities for brutality and, conversely, the great impact of kindly words or actions. In regard to brutality, there were persistent allegations in the later nineteenth century that prisoners seen as defiant or otherwise objectionable by staff were beaten and tortured in their cells by staff, particularly at night. In this regard, Irish men causing explosions or making violent assaults on political figures in the cause of Irish freedom from British rule reported a litany of verbal abuse, beatings, foul bedding, contaminated food, degrading personal searches, sleep deprivation, denial of heating, manacling in irons and other abuse (*Report of the Commissioners to Inquire into the Treatment of Treason Felony Convicts 1871*; *Report of the Visitors of HM Prison Chatham 1890*). But, there were reports of this from other categories. A short-sentence prisoner recalled revenge taken on a fellow prisoner for a complaint to the inspector:

> 'You ungrateful young scoundrel. I'll teach you to tell the inspector.' Then there was the thud, thud of heavy blows or kicks interrupted by a scream of agony . . . sudden shrieks of 'Oh don't, Sir, don't', intermingled with the gruff voice of the warder, hoarse with passion, declaring with many oaths that he'd teach the young scoundrel to tell of him. (One Who Has Tried Them 1883, vol. 2: 173)

Other prisoners reported the overwhelming silence of separation, especially at night, punctuated by sudden breakdown of control as a prisoner smashed up a cell or gave vent to long, agonized wailing. Another, in 1904, recalled the nocturnal howls at

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Pentonville, where sentences of flogging with a cat-o'-nine-tails was carried out at night, and a general atmosphere of tyranny, contempt and treatment 'as though we were just dogs' (Anon 1904: 53, 167). A particular feature of the complaints of suffragettes, who were force-fed to end hunger strikes, was that this was done with great force and indignity, in the cell, out of sight of others.

Equally, there was intense recognition when genuine unconditional kindness was shown. In particular, prisoners greatly valued direct honesty when mixed with concern for the individual. As one prisoner recalled of one of the warders on his landing:

> 'I am very sorry, really very sorry for you, but you can understand that we are obliged to be strictly impartial here.' He spoke with a hearty, earnest ring in his voice that told me he really meant what he said. . . . 'I will help you as far as the prison rules and regulations permit.' It was said in a frank, hearty manner and I felt instinctively that he was a man I could implicitly trust to be as good as his word. (One Who Has Tried Them 1883, vol. 1: 205–6)

The personal characteristics of each officer were carefully noted, for these might be the only human contact of the day. A conscientious objector to service in the First World War, who served long periods in cellular isolation, referred to 'the cherubic smile' of one officer and added 'when he laughed, the whole of his face zealously co-operated; eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, ears and tongue all joined in the merriment' (Mason 1918: 152).

Prisoners did not, of course, readily accept this prohibition on communication and devised most ingenious methods of making contact with their fellows. Common methods included systems of 'morse code', which involved tapping messages on the water pipes, using subscriber lists with signals known to all subscribers for identification of prisoner for whom the message was intended, expertise in talking and whispering without moving the lips, adopting facial expressions known to connote certain messages and communicating under camouflage of other noise, such as singing of hymns and psalms in chapel, where prisoners were allowed to congregate under the watchful eyes of warders, sitting on raised daises so as to be able to detect any talking. The conscientious objector, Fenner Brockway, recalled his astonishment on first hearing this as part of the chanting. 'Welcome, Fenner, boy, When did you get here? How did you like the skilly this morn? Lord, Have mercy upon us'. There was also a 'deaf and dumb alphabet', understood generally in the prisons. (B.2.15 1924: 78). The labelling of tobacco as snout came from this alphabet because the signs for the question 'got any tobacco?' involved a great deal of rubbing the nose with a finger. In the 1920s, the Irish republican prisoners actually circulated a secret news-sheet, called *The Irish Felon*, which they printed and distributed at Chatham. Unsurprisingly, 'this had a good deal to say about England's prison system—very little of it complementary' (Clarke 1922: 39–40). Fenner Brockway produced a clandestine prison newspaper, written on lavatory paper, for a time, with news items, cartoons, articles and correspondence and distributed by the landing cleaner (Brockway 1942: 93–9).

Notwithstanding these attempts to break the ban on communication, the prohibition was exceedingly hard to bear and some reported the effects of the loneliness created by it. The Quaker socialist and conscientious objector, Stephen Hobhouse, who served a sentence for refusal to serve in the First World War, believed that it drove 'a man back exclusively upon himself, his own defects, his own grievances, his own needs' (Hobhouse 1951: 164). Some described actual stages of deterioration in separation from initial intense yearning for familiar parts of life, such as family or home, giving

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way to a hardening of emotions and diminution of sensitivity towards the suffering of others—what one referred to as 'the death of the soul' (B.2.15 1924: 190). As a woman ex-prisoner wrote in 1884:

> . . . cold, darkness, silence and solitude . . . are not curative or reformatory or humanising influences. They disease the body and depress, stupefy and debase the mind. Their tendency is to fill it with gloom, hatred and desperation.' (Zedner 1991: 140)

Many, of course, broke down completely. Florence Maybrick recalled the horror of listening to this in the middle of the night:

> . . . like a savage beast, the woman of turmoil has torn her clothing and bedding into shreds, and now she is destroying all she can lay her hands on. The ward officers are rushing about in slippered feet . . . and the woman, probably in a strait-jacket, is borne to the penal cells. Then stillness returns to the ghastly place, and with quivering nerves, I may sleep—if I can.' (Maybrick 1905: 860)

Prisoners made particular reference to the infliction of the death penalty at local prisons. Between 1880 and 1929, around 14 people were executed per year (*Report From The Select Committee on Capital Punishment 1930–31*: xiv) and there was extensive discussion of this in the writings of prisoners, because many of them were in prison when such an event occurred. Sean McConville has excavated the full detail of this aspect of prison discipline and his account of botched executions and drunken executioners conveys some of the collective horror that must have been felt by a local prison population, most of whom were in cellular confinement, entirely at the mercy of their custodians (McConville 1995: 409–31). It was agreed that a forthcoming execution often bred 'an atmosphere of silent brooding in officers and men alike' (Wood 1932: 377). There tended to be a build-up to an execution because the condemned prisoner sat apart from the others, in a special cubicle in chapel, and the actual approach of the execution day was publicly known. On the morning of an execution, the clocks were stopped and those prisoners who would have gone to associated labour were kept in their cells, along with the rest. The prisoners listened intently from their cells for every sound which would give a clue to the actual progress of the execution and had ways of calculating the time and, a few minutes before the time for the execution, there would descend a silence on the prison. This would only be broken by the crash of the traps opening and the heavy thud as the noose broke the neck, which could be faintly heard over much of the establishment. At this, on occasion, prisoners would roar a collective protest and revulsion and create a cacophony of noise by smashing their cell furniture.

A theme which was commented upon was the sexual deprivation suffered by prisoners, some of whom testified to intense sexual desire created by the enforced deprivation of sex in single cells. Although the subject was all but taboo in official reports, some commentators did refer to this as being very prevalent in separation. Permanent Under-Secretary of State for the Home Office, Sir Godfrey Lushington, criticized the 'isolation, monotony and limited amount of exercise' as leading to 'the solitary vice' in his evidence to the Gladstone Committee in 1895 (*Minutes of Evidence Taken by the Departmental Committee on Prisons 1895*: 404). At some prisons, blistering of the penis of young prisoners caught masturbating was practised to stop this and two tracts, 'The Narrow Way' and 'The Pack of Lies', were distributed to male prisoners to discourage masturbation (Priestley 1989: 53). This could be particularly troubling to prisoners because there was insistence throughout society that masturbation was not just sinful

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but was likely to lead to degeneracy, insanity and severe debilitation and, therefore, the intense urge for sexual release was frightening. Stuart Wood, who had served sentences since 1901, wrote that he felt great guilt and anxiety because he could not resist the temptation of 'this loathsome habit' in separation and felt that his self-control and confidence were badly damaged by giving way (Wood 1932: 61). There were also, on occasion, intense emotional and sexual relations between staff and inmates. Thus, a wardress at Tothill Fields House of Correction for Women in London wrote to Susan Fletcher in the early 1880s: 'My dear, darling baby—if I may still call you so . . . you don't know how miserable and unhappy I feel, now you are gone . . . I do miss you so much' (Fletcher 1884: 409). Undoubtedly, there were homosexual liaisons between those prisoners who found ways to evade the regime but not until the inter-War years, when association had become freer, does the literature refer to this in any detail (Macartney 1936: 418–26).

There was the greatest yearning for families, lovers and children in the cellular isolation which officially precluded intimate contact and kindness, where there was only the imagination and memory for company. Suffragettes noticed the prisoners at Holloway crying for absent families and loved ones, which regularly disturbed the night there (Richardson 1953: 69). The prisoners were particularly vulnerable to such yearning at times when family and friends were emphasized outside, as at Christmas or anniversaries, and familiar sounds at night evoked powerful emotion. One was moved at night in solitude at Pentonville by the familiar distant 'whistle of a railway engine with its suggestion of a journey home' (Davitt 1885: 172). The system also rigidly restricted visits and letters and, indeed, for the first eight weeks of sentence, neither was permitted. When visits were allowed, they took place with the prisoner and the visitor(s) placed in rows of cages opposite each other, separated by a corridor, with the warder sat between. One wife described this in 1921:

> I shall never thoroughly get over the shock which I had when I saw my husband through the bars . . . it makes me ill now to think of it. He stood pressing forward through the bars, clasping them tightly, his face dirty and unshaved, his eyes distraught, his body clothed in a rough, ill fitting way. Just for a moment I felt that I was looking through the dim light at some fierce, uncouth animal at the Zoo . . . the cruelty of the thing was a bitter persistent memory. (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922: 211)

Some prisoners refused to receive visitors in such degrading conditions. Furthermore, all outgoing and incoming letters were censored, with paragraphs or sentences deleted by the censors. There was a strong tendency to delete content on the most trivial grounds and even the mildest of criticisms of the regime were deleted, with the entire process discouraging all intimacy or expression of feeling.

Uniformed staff were required only to communicate with prisoners on matters of discipline and order, and they were expressly prohibited from conversation. This meant that any exchange beyond such matters was contrary to the rules until the inter-War years and the effect tended to be short, barked, staccato orders and instructions from the staff. This peculiar interaction was described thus by a suffragette prisoner, Constance Lytton. She had asked the wardress for better-fitting shoes and waited for the reply.

> She seemed not to have heard what I said, did not look my way, but shouted past me into the air, speaking in a loud voice without any variety of intonation in a way that sounded strange and

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unnatural, as if she were proclaiming an edict written by another person; 'It's-no-good-complaining-about-those;-they're-the-largest-size-in-stock-you-can't-have-any-others-so-you'd-better-make-the-best-of-them.' (Lytton 1914: 82)

Another recalled the peculiarity and menace of the interactions:

. . . the warders' faces were continuously covered with an impenetrable mask, cold hard, chilling . . . the mechanism of their routine duties and the severity of discipline have robbed them of most of the attributes of humanity. (Brocklehurst 1898: 83)

Despite this, there was a good deal of testimony that the warders were themselves an oppressed group, many of whom had made an effort to adopt a harsh and unbending demeanour, because the regime required this and they were severely disciplined if they subverted the system. Constance Lytton caught a wardress off guard on one occasion and noticed that:

. . . her eyes were lit with kindliness and her whole face beamed on me with genial good will . . . the personality was the same, but the mask was off and I realised something of the sacrifice it must be to this woman continually to conceal her good nature under so forbidding a manner. (Lytton 1914: 160)

There was, of course, on occasion, subversion of the rules by prison staff. For example, experienced prisoners were adept at getting luxuries smuggled into the prison by staff who had been bribed by friends or family outside. In addition, there were breaches of the embargo on any but the most necessary communications between staff and prisoners out of sympathy or kindness. One reported that a warder, entirely out of kindness, left luxuries such as a piece of cake for him in his cell, on the shared understanding that, if superior officers found these, the prisoner would take the blame for these being in the cell (One Who Has Tried Them 1883, vol. 2: 58).

Animals also played an important part in relieving loneliness. There has been little discussion of the role played by animals in English prisons in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite the fact that these played an important role in the lives of staff and inmates. They were, on occasion, part of the economy of the institution, as, for example, was the case with the cows, horses and sheep on the Dartmoor prison farm. They were part of the system of surveillance and control, as with guard dogs or horses ridden by warders in charge of outside work parties. Often, they were pets of both staff and prisoners and held great significance in the intense emotional atmosphere prevailing amongst human beings held in the regulated, cellular, total institutions which made up the prison system of that era.

Many who knew the prison system drew attention to the intensity of feelings towards animals owned by staff. Sydney Moseley visited prisoners in Dartmoor in the 1920s and noticed that the deputy governor's bull terrier, Bonzo, 'was a favourite with the old lags . . . a useful mediator between many a morose prisoner and those who wish to help him' (Moseley 1927: 57). Prisoners could remember, for years, the pets of the staff at prisons where they had served sentences in the past. Captain Clayton, governor of Dartmoor at around the same time, commented that he found that prisoners were prone to devotion to animals. He remembered an exchange with a prisoner, who had known him many years before, at Portland in 1921, when he had a dog called 'Stumps'. On hearing that the dog had died, the prisoner replied: 'Ah well, we all come to it. That's all, Sir, but that dog, begging your pardon, was the only thing there that understood

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me' (Clayton 1958: 113). On occasions when the prison authorities separated prisoners from their pets, they could face defiance and assault. In 1881, for example, John Edwards, a prisoner serving two years and who had tamed a pet mouse and taught it to run about his arms and neck, attempted to stab a sub-warder after the staff had deliberately killed the little creature (McConville 1995: 478).

Prisoners valued the relief from the gloom and monotony of the regime that was provided by animals with which they became acquainted and, of course, the most frequent visitors to the cells were birds. A convict described how, at Millbank, he used to feed the sparrows who nested in the window of his cell, from which, for some reason, one of the glass squares had been removed. The cell in question was chosen by the sparrows because it was next to the warm flues from the heating system and the convict came to value immensely his relationship with these creatures. As he wrote:

> A fine chattering noise they made in the early spring time. Their chirruping invariably woke me before the prison bell. My crumbs were looked for by them regularly and, as I did not eat much more than half my allowance of bread, I was enabled to feed plenty of them: they were not at all shy, and would come close up to the glass. At times one more impudent than another would jump up on to the cross bar of the iron grating of the window and chirp to tell me to make haste over my breakfast and give him and his mates theirs. (One Who Has Endured It 1877: 113–14)

Michael Davitt, the Irish Nationalist crusader, in 1885, dedicated his account of his sentence to 'Joe', a blackbird who became his pet at Portland. He recalled that 'Joe would stand on my breast, as I lay in bed in the morning, and awaken me from sleep. He would perch on my plate and share my porridge. Towards evening he would resort to his perch, the post of the iron bedstead, and there remain, silent and still, till the dawning of another day' (Davitt 1885, vol. 1: vii). Mary Richardson, one of the suffragettes imprisoned in Holloway for wilful damage to Home Office property, referred to the pleasure she gained from the London sparrows: '. . . they were so friendly . . . I used to see them hopping and chirping on the ledge outside my cell' (Richardson 1953: 17). A recidivist confidence trickster, who had served long sentences, recalled that he had made friends with three sparrows, which he had gradually tamed, and to which he gave the names 'Peter, Paul and Potiphar' (Harland-Edgecumbe 1934: 247–56).

Victorian prison inspectors were astonished to encounter intense relationships with sparrows and rats amongst prisoners held in cellular confinement and reported in detail how prisoners tamed rats and became deeply attached to them (Griffiths 1894, vol. 2: 274–81). At Camp Hill prison, one of the prisoners was very violent and destructive, until he tamed a rat. 'He says he tamed the rat. The fact is the rat tamed him, for he is now one of the best workers in the place' (Moseley 1927: 101). Some showed great ingenuity in developing their interest in animals. Jim Phelan, a fringe member of the Irish Republican Army, was sentenced to death for his part in a post office raid which resulted in murder, but had his sentence commuted to penal servitude for life in the early 1920s. He served 13 years, mostly in Dartmoor and Parkhurst, and became an avid birdwatcher. Many years later, he recalled that he made a telescope out of lavatory paper and glass, stuck together with prison porridge (Phelan 1940: 32). Warders recalled extraordinary feats of training of these by prisoners. One, who joined the service just after the First World War, 'knew a convict who taught a mouse to sit on its hind legs and hold a splinter of wood in its forepaws, much like a soldier on guard' (Triston 1938: 148).

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After 1921, there was a strengthening move away from cellular isolation. In part, this was because Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise retired from the chairmanship of the Prison Commission that year. There was also strong criticism of the conditions outlined above on the part of the Labour Party. In addition, psychological theory was increasingly emphasizing the value of interaction in association within a prison community. Between 1921 and 1939, talking was permitted at work and more generally, and the initial periods of cellular separation in local and convict prisons abolished. In the same period, there were experiments with debating societies, self-expression groups, sporting and musical clubs, and entertainment, such as concerts and cinema shows. Experimental camp borstals, such as Lowdham Grange and Hollesley Bay, were established, in contrast to the much more penal, repressive discipline of the earlier borstals. These were set up to operate according to a vision of group living, with communities of staff led by housemasters and inmates living in Christian fellowship with one another, engaged in hard work, sport, education and training and bound by ties of respect and dedication to the house. They were particularly championed by the reforming Prison Commissioner, Alexander Paterson, who believed that such an approach was also suitable for many adult prisoners. Indeed, the first camp prison, New Hall Camp, was opened near Wakefield in 1936. However, the problem faced by those who wished to ameliorate the severity of the system was, in part, the architecture inherited from the Victorians. As one chairman of the Prison Commission put it, 'nothing less than dynamite could rid us of these grimy and forbidding fortresses' (Scott 1959: 85) and plans to sell off a lot of these were only frustrated by the outbreak of war.

Prison regimes and architecture say much about the views of human nature which dominate a society at any given time and the themes of loneliness and penitence through isolation chimed closely with the severe moralistic Anglican protestantism of the mid-nineteenth century, with its stern call to conscience and atonement through suffering. But there was also the persistent theme of fear of congregation—the sense that, if those presumed to come from the lowest classes gathered in unchecked association, then the structures of social order would be threatened with overthrow. It was, therefore, essential to curtail such interaction in prisons, where the seditious characteristics of the prisoner might safely be assumed. Lastly, there was always a residue of that totalitarian impulse that the human mind could be restocked with appropriate thinking if subjected only to ideas which were in accordance with those of their custodians and the wider social order which they served. It was this fervent belief in the possibility of transformation of personality and behaviour which had been such a strong feature of the thinking of those who created the separate system in the first place and not the least remarkable feature of the history of cellular isolation was its persistence as an article of faith amongst prison disciplinarians in England long after the fundamentalist and extreme faith in its powers of moral regeneration had evaporated.

In large part, this persistence is explained by the perceived consistency of cellular isolation with changing penal theorizing (Forsythe 1990). In the later nineteenth century, the onset of neo-Darwinian eugenic ideas easily sat with the need to quarantine prisoners from contact with each other for reasons of both deterrence and institutional control. But such isolation also meshed well with an ethos of precise measurement of penalty, dominant at the same time, in that cellular isolation allowed exact infliction of suffering. This commitment only began to wane as new ideas of educative interaction

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and group participation started to take hold at the end of the century, influenced by the new Liberalism that was fashionable at the time. These ideas came to the fore in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, cellular isolation as a penal practice remained highly resilient, not least because of the faith that was held in it by Sir Edmund DuCane and Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, whose domination of the Prison Commission between 1878 and 1921 deeply affected policy and practice.

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